



The Florida Senate

Interim Project Report 2000-02

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Committee on Agriculture and Consumer Services

Senator Pat Thomas, Chairman

FLORIDA CONSUMER INFORMATION SERVICE WEBSITE

SUMMARY

As today's marketplace continues to grow and become more complex, consumers have an ever greater need to obtain up-to-date information on consumer laws, who to contact for assistance, or what steps to take to file a complaint. Providing Florida consumers with this information has been a priority of the Senate since 1971 when it published its first consumer handbook. In 1997, the Senate Committee on Governmental Reform and Oversight explored the possibility of using the Internet to provide the public with consumer information by creating a consumer website. The committee was successful in developing the website, but due to changes being made in the Senate's computer system, the project was put on hold and the website has remained dormant, stored on the Department of Management Services' production server. As part of the Interim Work Plan for the 2000 Session, Senate President Toni Jennings assigned the Committee on Agriculture and Consumer Services the task of updating the Florida Consumer Information Services Website and making it available for Florida consumers.

distributed. Three other editions of this handbook were published in 1974, 1976, and 1981.

The *Guide to Florida Consumer Services and Laws* evolved into the *Florida Consumer Services and Laws, 1987*. By this time, a number of state laws of interest to consumers had been established or revised. Because of these significant changes and as a response to consumer requests, Senate President John Vogt assigned the Committee on Economic, Community and Consumer Affairs the task of compiling a more extensive book of basic information about Florida's consumer protection laws and services.

By 1993, as the marketplace continued to grow and become more complex, an ever greater need for consumers to obtain up-to-date information existed. Senate President Ander Crenshaw assigned the Committee on Professional Regulation the task of revising the information contained in the previous handbooks to effectively assist consumers in dealing with problems. The *1993 Florida Consumer Handbook* was published to provide a source of information which would direct Florida consumers to the appropriate agency or individual who could provide assistance and information.

BACKGROUND

In 1971, Senate President Jerry Thomas assigned the Senate Committee on Commerce a project to develop a consumer handbook. Time after time, Florida consumers had appeared before Senate committees and indicated a desire to know more about the state's consumer laws, regulations, protection of various consumer activities, and rights in the marketplace. Senator Thomas noted that one of the greatest desires of the consumer was for more information about products, as well as credit disclosures, in order to be a better shopper. He had determined that consumers were asking for consumer education rather than protection. It seemed that the consumer would rather protect himself through better education about products and laws than to have some agency, organization, or governmental entity intercede for them. To meet this desire, the committee published the first edition of the *Guide to Florida Consumer Services and Laws*. This publication received wide public acceptance and many copies were

In 1997, the Committee on Governmental Reform and Oversight explored the possibility of creating a consumer website on the Internet. The Internet was revolutionizing the computer and communications world like nothing before. It was all at once a world-wide broadcasting capability, a mechanism for information dissemination, and a medium for collaboration and interaction between individuals and their computers without regard for geographic location. Over 4,000,000 people use the Internet and that number will continue to grow. The committee decided to utilize this method of providing consumer information because the Internet is accessible to an increasingly greater number of Florida consumers and it would also allow the handbook to be updated more quickly and easily.

METHODOLOGY

Staff met with the Senate Secretary's Office and webmasters at the Office of Legislative Information Technology Services regarding procedures and software used in legislative website development. Staff then met with the Department of Management Services employee who originally developed the consumer site based on the text and organization of the *1993 Florida Consumer Handbook* to determine how the website should be transferred from the Department of Management Services to the Senate. Next, the Florida Consumer Information Services Website was thoroughly examined to update links and improve user navigability.

FINDINGS

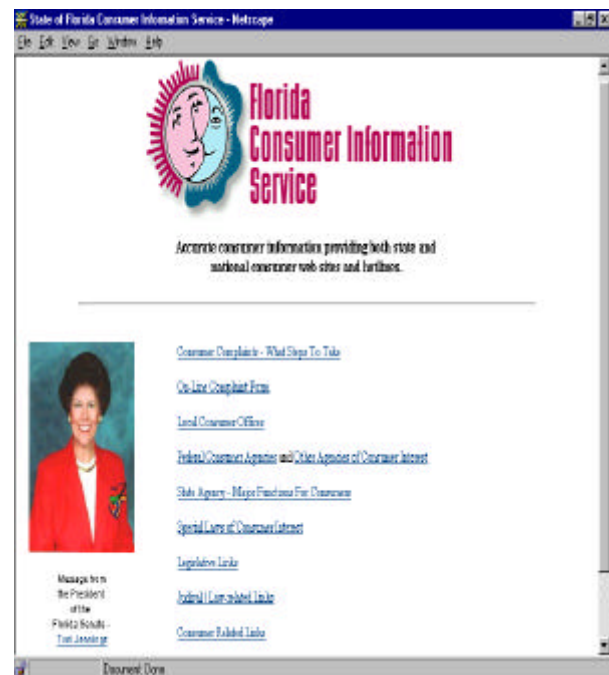
In 1962, President John F. Kennedy proclaimed four basic consumer rights: safety, information, choice and a voice in the development of consumer policies. The ability to protect consumers has become more challenging as the number of businesses has increased, the level of fraud sophistication has increased, and the number of consumers requiring protection has increased. Florida's population is projected to grow to 15,428,873 by the year 2000. While the state's population continues to grow, the population of those most vulnerable to fraud, the elderly, also continues to grow.

Under pressure from this ever increasing population of consumers, United States Congressmen, state legislators, and local officials have sponsored legislation on every phase of consumerism. There have been consumer movements in the past based upon issues such as product safety and quality, deceptive practices, monopolistic practices, and aesthetics. As the number and complexity of consumer products and services has increased, the Florida Legislature has enacted various business registration and licensure programs. The result of this era of more intricate laws has been the evolution of a system of consumer information services to meet the needs of Florida's citizens. Senate committees have published consumer handbooks since 1971 to provide a source of information which would direct consumers to the appropriate agency or individual who can provide assistance and information. In 1997, the Committee on Governmental Reform and Oversight decided to use the Internet as a source for consumer information, since usage of this communications network is so widespread.

By the 1980s, public use of the Internet had become more and more popular and it had begun to be used as a major source of information. The early Internet was

used by computer experts, engineers, and scientists and there was nothing user friendly about it. Since it was initially funded by the government, it was originally limited to research, education, and government uses. The Internet was adopted by the United States Defense Department in 1980. In 1991, the first user friendly interface to the Internet was developed and use of the Internet exploded. In 1997, staff of the Governmental Reform and Oversight Committee believed that the *Florida Consumer Handbook* could be accessible to many more people if it was available on the Internet and that it would also provide a more efficient way to keep rapidly changing information updated. One problem with the original printed handbooks was that they quickly became outdated after being published.

Staff met with the Department of Management Services, the agency responsible for the state's technology infrastructure, to determine how this project could be accomplished. Secretary Linder believed that it would be a good project to perpetuate the Internet and that it also met with the mission of the Department of Management Services. The department provided a Special Assistant to the Secretary to analyze, design, and develop a website based on the paper-based *1993 Florida Consumer Handbook*. The website was put on the department's production server so it could be tested and approved before transferring it to the Internet.



<http://www.state.fl.us/dms/sec/consumer>

After the website was developed, the next step to putting it on the Internet was delayed because the Senate computer system was undergoing many changes. This has resulted in no one being able to access this valuable

information unless someone involved in the project provides them with the address, because the website is not linked to any other website.

As part of the Interim Work Plan for the 2000 Legislative Session, Senate President Toni Jennings assigned the Committee on Agriculture and Consumer Services the task of updating the Florida Consumer Information Services Website and making it available for Florida consumers. Staff first met with the Senate Secretary's Office and webmasters at the Office of Legislative Information Technology Services (OLITS) regarding procedures for legislative website development. Legislative websites are first uploaded onto a test Internet server that is only available to the legislative network to ensure that data is correct before making it available to the public.

OLITS indicated that, for consistency, the software Dreamweaver, a Macromedia product used to generate and edit HTML code, should be used to accomplish this assignment. Dreamweaver is currently being used by the Senate Secretary's Office for Online Sunshine. Staff then met with the Special Assistant to the Secretary who had designed the website and was informed that two versions of the Florida Consumer Information Website exist. The more recent site has content/links that are organized differently and it also includes advanced animation/design techniques. Both the Special Assistant and committee staff agreed that the "best of the best" should be integrated into an entirely new, "clean" site in an effort to prevent possible conversion and integration conflicts in the file transfer process. The new design will allow flexibility and expansion of links, therefore enabling additional information to be added to meet the wide range of consumer needs.

At this point, administrative responsibilities for the website were transferred from the Department of Management Services to the Florida Senate. Committee on Agriculture and Consumer Services staff downloaded the website and saved each page as a separate file for editing purposes. To facilitate the new website

development, a temporary version of Dreamweaver, was downloaded on the committee's computer. A permanent version of Dreamweaver is currently being installed by OLITS to facilitate the ability to keep the website updated.

The Florida Consumer Information Services Website has been thoroughly examined and both absolute and relative links have been updated. The website has been published true to printed page layout. The page layout is being redesigned to improve user navigability and communication based upon current web technology. User access to existing complaint procedures has been upgraded and links have been expanded to reflect numerous consumer sites available on the web. Committee staff used web search engines to locate other consumer websites that could be linked to the Florida Consumer Information Service Website to provide a wide range of additional information to assist consumers in their ability to help themselves.

The Senate Secretary's Office has determined that the Florida Consumer Information Services Website should be linked to Online Sunshine, the official guide to the Florida Legislature. Online Sunshine has become increasingly popular since its creation. In June 1999, the home page had 111,000 hits and the entire site had 3.6 million. The Florida Consumer Information Services Website can also be accessed through its own web address or by inserting the word "consumer" into an Internet search engine.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Florida Consumer Information Services Website should be linked to Online Sunshine so consumers can access the website and utilize this extensive source of consumer assistance. The website should be updated on a regular basis.

COMMITTEE(S) INVOLVED IN REPORT *(Contact first committee for more information.)*

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MEMBER OVERSIGHT

Senators Meek and Grant